

Castaways on the Labrador

by *Cassie Brown*

as told by MRS. MARY MALONE

Exclusive
to
"Woman"

The Eskimo waved an arm towards the young white girl as he addressed the big, rawny-boned white man, "Me marry her!"

The young girl threw a horrified look at the squat figure of the Eskimo and fled to the sanctuary of the house and her mother, while the white man shook his head and said, firmly, "No!"

The Eskimo drew himself up and said, with dignity, "Me good man, me good hunter, give you furs and food."

There was no denying he was the best of the four Eskimo hunters in the Labrador's Emily Harbour, and the white man was only too well aware of the fact that he and his family were dependant upon him for food. To anger this Eskimo could make it difficult for them, for he was a good man and looked upon with respect by the other Eskimos.

Captain Nicholas Kennedy was no man to be dependant upon others, but circumstances had left him and his family, castaways upon bleak Labrador without provisions, or the means of providing food, and now one of their benefactors was showing an ardent affection for his 17-year-old daughter Julia.

It was a situation that was going to require the utmost diplomacy.

It happened many years ago, before the turn of the century, but a surviving member of the family, although a small child at the time, recalls much of it, clearly.

The year was 1897, and little Mary Kennedy was one of eleven children of the great family of Captain Nicholas Kennedy of Crocker's Cove, Conception Bay, and she still remembers the wonderful hustle and bustle of the family preparation for the yearly summer trip to the Labrador for the fishery.

In those days, women, unwilling to be separated from their men for long months, gathered their children and some household goods, and accompanied their men to the



Mary Malone was a small child when castaway on the Labrador. She vividly remembers much of the harrowing experience.

(Photo by Frank Kennedy).

Labrador.

Captain Nicholas Kennedy and his two brothers, Captain John Kennedy and Captain Terence Kennedy, fished out of Sloop Cove, twelve miles north of Emily Harbour, and shared a huge permanent home at Sloop Cove. Besides the house there was a barn for their livestock, and a bunkhouse for their crew of bold sharemen.

With Nicholas' eleven children, John's nine children, and Terence's ten children, as well as sharemen for each schooner, it was generally a happy time.

This year, before leaving for the Labrador, Captain Dan Pumphrey of Harbour Grace had made special arrangements to ship some of his fish home on Nicholas' ship. "You bring back some of my fish and I'll bring you and your family home on my schooner."

Why such an agreement was made is not clear, now, but the agreement was made. Dan Pumphrey would send his fish to Sloop Cove by trap skiff, from his own fishing grounds further north, and stow it aboard Nicholas' schooner. With its double load, there would be no room to stow the Kennedy family and their belongings, so he would pick them up when he was coming down the coast heading for home. He named the date that he would pick them up.

It was May when the Kennedy brothers and their families left Crocker's Cove, each ship bursting with people, livestock and provision. One schooner carried hens, another had goats, and the third had a cow.

Mary Kennedy remembered

enough to recall that it was a beautiful summer. There were beautiful beaches where they played and swam in the warm water. Little Mary's favourite game was to play boat. Her mother's wooden washtub, made from a pork barrel, was her own special boat, and she sat in it at the water's edge when it wasn't in use.

When she wasn't boating, she played with the other children in their own special cave up in the hills. This was their own house, and here, over the years, they had collected their own pots and pans, and frequently had their own boil-ups when they snatched fresh grown vegetables from the three gardens. Even little Mary would slip into her uncle's garden to grab a head of tender cabbage, then run like mad to the cave.

She remembers her Uncle Terence saying loudly, "If I ever catch that young Mary stealing my cabbage . . ."

But she knew it was just words. Uncle Terence would never lay a finger on her. So they had wonderful fun, thinking that they were putting one over on the adults, not knowing then, that it was exactly what her own father and uncles used to do when they were children, for the Kennedys had fished in Sloop Cove for generations.

The men hauled cod in the trap skiffs and brought their catches back to the cove to be salted and dried and stored away. Captain Dan Pumphrey kept sending his fish to the schooner. The women kept house and fed their men and children, and all were happy.

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The wonderful, carefree summer slipped away and then it was late September and nippy weather. It was time to close up house and get away from the Labrador before the frost closed the harbour and bays. Again there was the wonderful hustle and bustle as the families packed for their home in Crocker's Cove.

Nicholas had his belongings packed on his ship, which his crew of sharemen, but two, would sail home, and they all watched her wistfully, as she sailed, heavily laden, out of Sloop Cove for home. His trap skiff, which would carry them out to Pumphrey's ship, was still moored in the cove.

John and Terence were soon ready to leave, and it was plain that they didn't like the idea of going off and leaving Nicholas and his family on the Labrador.

"Come home with us," they pleaded, "we'll make room for you on our vessels."

But Nicholas refused. He was a man of his word. The arrange-

ments made with Dan Pumphrey, still stood. He and his family would wait.

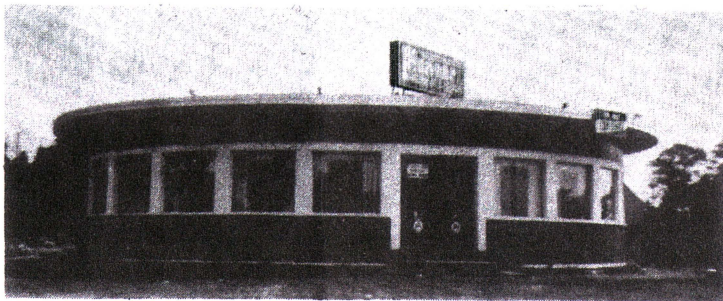
The brothers argued and pleaded with him to come, but he pointed out that if Dan Pumphrey came by and found no one, he wouldn't know what had gone wrong. They would wait, as planned. In two or three days they would all be on the way home.

John and Terence finally left, sailing out of Sloop Cove, leaving the Kennedy family and two sharemen, watching from the shore with mixed feelings.

They were left with a half barrel of flour and a half quintal of dried salt fish to take them over the next few days before Dan Pumphrey was to pick them up.

It was a strange feeling to be on the Labrador with a limited amount of food, and only a small, open trap skiff, but if the adults kept a constant, uneasy lookout for Dan Pumphrey, the small children played blissfully. Mary was happy as long as she had her

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'boat'.

It turned cold, and the children, clad only in summer cottons and slight jackets found it too cold to play outside. A constant watch was kept for Dan Pumphrey. The day he was scheduled to pick them up found them ready and waiting. Mrs. Kennedy was on the lookout.

She appeared suddenly, white and shaken. "Pumphrey's gone home without us." His ship had just passed down, about six miles from the land, and he hadn't come into Sloop Cove for them.

Nicholas was worried, but said encouragingly, "You must be mistaken — why you can't see that distance with the naked eye."

His wife, white-faced, replied, "It was him."

Nicholas went to the lookout, then returned, and the look on his face confirmed what his wife had said. Pumphrey had passed them by. It had to be his ship, there wasn't another that far north.

The situation was serious. By the time Pumphrey got home and it was discovered that the Kennedy family was still on the Labrador, navigation would be closed, and no ordinary ship would be able to break through the ice that formed so quickly over the harbours and inlets of Labrador.

There were fifteen of them, with food that could be stretched only so far. They had guns, so much shot for wild game, but certainly not enough to take them through the winter.


There was only one hope of survival. Living in Emily Harbour, fifteen miles to the south, there were four friendly Eskimo families. They would row to Emily Harbour and winter with the Eskimos.

The decision made, the Kennedys and their two sharemen made preparation to leave the next day. A note of the date was

made, and a message written to the effect that they had rowed to Emily Harbour, was left in a tin can and put on the table just in case someone did come to look for them and could get through.

Early the next day their belongings were stowed in the trap skiff. All the bedding was taken to wrap around the lightly clad children, shivering from the icy winds.

Mary saw her washtub 'boat' filled with pots and pans, set

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Captain Nicholas Kennedy, a son of Nicholas, was a young boy at the time the family was left on the Labrador. He had a colorful and successful career on the sea, and died about ten years ago.

(Photo by Frank Kennedy)

afloat and tied to the trap skiff to be towed, and highly indignant because her beautiful boat was filled with old pots and pans, demanded that they let her ride in her own boat.

She was carried bodily to the skiff, protesting furiously, and was wrapped in blankets, where she huddled resentfully as she watched her own lovely boat dancing blithely behind them.

A biting October wind hit them as they rowed the heavy trap skiff out of the cove into the cold Arctic Current. Huddled together for warmth, and wrapped in bedding, they looked a strange crew indeed.

It took them the full day to row the twelve miles to Emily Harbour, where they were warmly welcomed by the four Eskimo families. The Eskimos, accustomed to the comings and goings of the white men, could speak enough English to be understood. Upon learning of the situation, they promptly vacated one of their four

homes and offered it to Captain Kennedy and his family. But they had no food to offer except to share what the hunters brought home. This they shared willingly, although it was little enough.

The house, though small and cramped, was solidly constructed, but with a sodded roof. There was no stove, but there was an open fireplace, and the men had to put in pot hooks and hangers so they could hang a kettle or pot over the fire. Captain Kennedy was pleased. They had shelter, and between them, they could trap enough to keep body and soul together over the winter.

But they must keep a constant lookout in case a ship did get through. So a flag was flown from a hilltop by day, and a fire kept going every night.

It was a grim situation. The flour and fish was disappearing fast, and game was scarce, so there was nothing for it but to put them all on rations. There was no carefree play or games now. The children were kept busy gathering firewood to keep them from freezing at night, and to keep that fire on the lookout, going. Their summer clothing was

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pitifully inadequate against the harsh weather of October.

The Eskimos shared their meat with them, but that was sufficient only to make soup, and there was never enough to fill their bellies, and so the dreary days dragged on. Ice began to form in the bays and if a ship didn't arrive soon, they were finished.

A complication arose. One of the Eskimos, the best hunter in the group, decided he wanted 17 year old Julia for his wife. He approached Captain Kennedy confident of his welcome, for everyone knew he was the best hunter, the best provider for them all. He pointed to Julia, smiling. "Me marry her, she keep house for me."

Julia was horrified, but careful to curb her tongue. She knew too well that to anger or humiliate

this mighty hunter might be disastrous.

Nicholas shook his head and said, "No!"

The Eskimo said with dignity, "Me good man, me best hunter, give you furs and food, You no starve."

Nicholas said, "Aye, you are a good man, but I cannot give you my daughter."

But that wasn't the end of it. The Eskimo was very determined to have Julia, and at every opportunity tried to present her with gifts of furs. Sometimes he tried to put an arm around her and Julia would flee to the protection of her mother's side.

The Eskimo proposed several times and was hurt when she did not want to share his bed. Was he not a good man - a mighty hunter? He was a good provider, and it was his food that kept them going.

The strain on Julia was

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Captain William Kennedy, another son of Nicholas, was also a young boy at the time they were cast away on the Labrador. He died in the Viking disaster, 1931.

(Photo by Frank Kennedy)

beginning to tell. She remained close to her mother and stayed out of sight as much as possible when he was around.

Meanwhile, two weeks after he had left the Labrador, Captain Dan Pumphrey sailed into Harbour Grace and was greeted by Bishop McDonald, who had come specifically to the wharf to greet Nicholas and his family.

Said Pumphrey, "Didn't he come home with his brothers?"

The Bishop said, "He did not. He was waiting for you to pick him up."

"I thought sure he'd gone home with his brothers," Pumphrey confessed.

Knowing the dire circumstance the family would be in, Bishop McDonald immediately wired the British Admiralty to send a ship to Labrador to pick up the castaways, and a survey ship was sent down, but was unable to break through the slob ice

now formed over the bays and inlets.

Although the Kennedys were unaware of it, they were very much in the news as their plight was flashed around the world.

At that time, Captain Delaney of the S.S. Bruce was plying between Newfoundland and Canada.

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Upon hearing of Nicholas Kennedy's plight, Delaney offered to sail north to pick up the family. He was confident that his ship could easily make it through the ice.

The authorities gave him the go ahead.

Nearly a month had passed since the Kennedys and their two sharemen had come to Emily Harbour. They were eating, but there was never enough to fill their bellies, rabbits or birds were supplied by the men, or Julia's suitor.

By now Julia lived in fear that she might have to marry the Eskimo if game got any scarcer. Her suitor tried to woo her with all of his furs, and he couldn't understand why she wouldn't keep house for him. She was going to be there all winter, he reasoned, why shouldn't she keep house for him?

Little Mary wasn't too unhappy. There wasn't any fun, anymore, but the Eskimo women were very kind to them all, and one had even given her a pair of skinny whoppers (leather boots). But she was always hungry, and she hated the soup that they had, day after day...

The Bruce hove to off sloop Cove and Captain Delaney and two men rowed ashore. They found the note in the tin can, then signed their names to it, put it back in the can and nailed it to the table. One of the men put his name on a piece of board and nailed it to the ceiling. They left then, to

proceed to Emily Harbour to find the Kennedys.

It was snowing, but the children kept a constant watch for a ship. They had looked so often and so hopelessly, that they couldn't believe their eyes when they saw a SHIP steaming through the ice. They screamed and danced and raced down over the hill to bring the good news, and it seemed that nobody could quite believe their eyes.

But there she was, as beautiful a sight as they could ever hope to see. Julia raced to the beach, tears of happiness streaming from her eyes because now she could be free again, while her Eskimo suitor scowled angrily because he knew he would never have Julia, now.

Nicholas Kennedy waded out into the icy seas right to his waist to greet Captain Delaney, and there was great rejoicing by the Eskimos who were both glad and sorry to see them go. Glad for the white people, sad because they would miss them.

Very quickly the white people were transferred to the Bruce and they were at last on their way home.

They were never to return to the Labrador again. The following year only Nicholas went down because he would not expose his family to any such dangers again. The year after that, the Kennedys moved from Crocker's Cove to St. John's, and from that time, never fished on the Labrador.

The harrowing experience, the worry and strain, left its mark

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on Mrs. Kennedy, and she died two years later at the age of 43.

Most of the Kennedy family involved in this experience, before the turn of the century are dead, but Mary is still in vigorous health and is a bit of a world traveller. She now resides in Toronto, but is currently visiting relatives here in St. John's, and has given the above story to WOMAN.

We'll have more of Mrs. Malone's adventures next month.

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